

Solve means to set free, to release. A **problem** is something that needs a solution. In problem solving, then, you are searching for solutions to those things that hold you back, to set you free to accomplish a valued task.

History and Background

When you look at topical indexes for biblical study, it's not likely that you will find the category of problem solving. But having a problem and wanting to do something about it is a common experience of individuals and groups who are and have been a part of the church. When two or three are gathered to take on a task, part of what they do is solve problems.

Common Practices

People can deal with a problem in a number of ways. One way is to make believe that it does not exist and postpone dealing with it. This may work, for a while at least. Usually, though, the problem, if it's really a problem, reappears.

Another common practice is to make something out of nothing and create a problem when one doesn't exist. There are times when you have a problem, but it isn't what you first thought it was. That's why it's important to check out your perceptions with others, to see whether they perceive the problems as you do.

It can also happen that issues which

really require reflection and long-range planning are treated as a series of problems to be solved. This can create unnecessary disagreements and frustration.

Steps in Solving Problems

When a problem does exist, there are a number of steps to keep in mind. What is described here is fairly elaborate and you may want to scale it down. But there are times when attention to each step will prove useful.

- Acknowledge that the problem exists and accept the responsibility for handling it. This is an important step. It may be that you are not the one to deal with it. If not, then who is? You can talk about a problem for a long time without really acknowledging that it is yours.
- Identify the nature of the problem. In one brief sentence, state the problem.
- Explore the dimensions of the problem. What evidence do you have that the problem really exists? How accurate is the evidence? What steps led to the existence of the problem? For whom is this a problem and how? What are the forces at work that continue to make it a problem? What will happen if nothing is done? These questions open up your understanding of the problem.
- Isolate the basic parts of the problem. Most problems can be broken down into smaller parts for which

solutions are more likely.

- Get some clarity as to what can work for you in each of the basic parts of the problem. List the positive factors that are working to eliminate the problem. Also list those things that are working against you for each of the basic parts of the problem.
- Review your positive and negative factors. What can you do about each of the negative factors? What can you do to increase the positive factors? Doing this expands your sense of the options you have to consider when solving the problem.
- Determine whether you need expert advice to come up with options. If so, where and when will you get it?
- Review all of the options, looking for those that make the most sense. Sometimes it makes more sense to put emphasis on a positive factor rather than spend all your energy on a negative one. Sometimes the reverse is true. When you decide among the options, you have the beginning of a plan.
- Develop a strategy, deciding who will do what and when.
- Monitor the effectiveness of your strategy as you are carrying it out.
- Once you complete your strategy, evaluate how well it worked. What did you learn? Do you need to keep working at the problem?
- Determine whether there is anything you can do to avoid having the same problem return later. If so, develop a strategy to carry it out.

Other Ways to Solve Problems

There are some other ways you might want to consider when confronted with a problem.

Idea A: Ask Others

Invite a small group of people to work at solving the problem with you.

1. You describe the problem as you see it.
2. The others go off by themselves and work at arriving at a solution.
3. They present their solution to you. You say "the part of your solution that will work is ..." (state it and why) and "the part of your solution that will not work is ..." (state it and why). "Instead of that, we need something that will ..." (state the need).
4. The others go off by themselves again and try to refine the solution based on what you've said.
5. They return and offer solutions to meet the needs you articulated. If need be, you repeat steps 3 and 4 until you feel that you are near a workable solution.

This approach can be used over an extended period of time. The important thing is to make sure that the "others" understand their part as a helping role. You are the decision maker (or, your committee may be the decision maker).

Idea B: Working in Small Groups

This approach brings together people concerned about the problem to work in subgroups.

1. When everyone is together, arrive at a common brief statement of the problem to be solved.
2. Each subgroup defines what they see as the major obstacles and how they can be overcome.
3. Everyone gets together to hear one another's ideas.
4. The whole group decides on what is possible using insights from the various subgroups.

This approach can be used in very short or during extended periods of time. Its value is that creative solutions frequently happen as contrasting ideas from subgroups interact with each other.

Idea C: Experts

There are times when expert opinion is needed. This approach prepares the expert to address the question.

1. Know what your problem is and choose an expert.
2. State the problem and allow time for the expert to interview you so that full understanding is possible.
3. Ask the expert to come up with alternate solutions and to indicate what it will take for you to work at each of the alternatives.
4. Give the expert time to work on solutions.
5. Receive the suggestions and explore each of them fully with the expert.
6. Decide what makes the most sense to you and strategize about how to achieve it.

Skills and Attributes Needed

- Nondefensiveness.
- Ability to accept problems as natural.
- Ability to communicate well.
- Ability to listen.
- Enjoyment of analyzing.
- Belief that there is no perfect solution.

Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Become familiar with problem-solving techniques and options. Local libraries are a rich source of printed material in this area.
- Groups like Pfeiffer & Company (8517 Production Avenue, San Diego, CA 92121) and the Alban Institute (4125 Nebraska Avenue N.W., Washington, DC 20016) provide resource materials that can be used in problem solving.
- Create a "problem" and practice solving it as a part of the orientation or continuing education of church leaders.

Issues Facing the Church

- There is a danger that adherence to the process of problem solving will

- become legalistic. How can you use the process without letting it get in the way?
- Many people want experiences without problems. Can you be healthy and problemless?
- Some people assume that problems involving people in conflict are unacceptable. What do you do when conflict is involved?

Questions

- What are the steps you might use in solving a problem?
- What is a problem your church is facing that needs attention?
- What do you do best in solving problems?
- What do you need help in doing in solving problems?